

ED 330 921

CG 022 963

AUTHOR Murrell, Stanley A.
TITLE Resource Versatility and Specificity for Elder Physical and Mental Health.
PUB DATE 13 Aug 90
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 10-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Life Events; Mental Health; *Older Adults; Physical Health; *Research Methodology; *Research Needs; *Research Problems; *Well Being

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on resource versatility and specificity for elder physical and mental health. First, the history of the progress of research on life events, resources, and well-being is reviewed. The trend toward emphasizing specific events rather than aggregate events and the trend toward giving greater recognition to the context in which stress and resources operate are discussed. An explanation of the context in which stress and resources operate are discussed. The Louisville project in which a probability sample of nearly 3,000 respondents aged 55 and older were interviewed concerning life events and resources is provided, and examples from that project are given in this paper. It is suggested that perhaps greater attention should be paid to both desirable events and positive mental health. The topics of specificity, explication, and context are reviewed. It is concluded that three directions of research will be essential if the field is to develop. Specifically, it is stated that: (1) precise studies are needed that are specific, rigorous, and refined, whose resource measures are clearly unidimensional, and whose event subtypes are narrowly defined; (2) comparative studies are needed which compare resources on different event sub-types that are more complex and cumbersome; and (3) models of mechanisms that operate across different events, or within event classes, need to be developed and tested. (ABL)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED330921

RESOURCE VERSATILITY AND SPECIFICITY FOR ELDER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Stanley A. Murrell

University of Louisville

Paper presented at the symposium The longitudinal study of elder well being, chaired by Alex Zautra, at the American Psychological Association Convention, Boston, August, 13, 1990.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Stanley A. Murrell

2

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG022963

Resource Versatility and Specificity for Elder Physical and Mental Health

Stanley A. Murrell

(1990). In A. Zautra (Chair), The longitudinal study of elder well being. Symposium conducted at the American Psychological Association Convention, Boston.

HISTORY

First, a little history.

In the beginning there was the correlation between life events and mental illness. Then came the buffer effect. Now there is disaggregation and complication. In the future: specification, explication, and paradigm-shift.

Figure 1 gives a simplified view of the progress of research on life events, resources, and well being up to now.

display Figure 1

Prior to 1975, roughly, medical researchers (for the most part) had taken what was essentially a life history emphasized by Adolf Meyer and put it into a list, the Holmes and Rahe scale being the most famous version. Soon, correlates were found between the life event scores and all manner of disorders and symptoms, e.g. heart disease, childhood leukemia, pregnancy, and college football injuries, as well as other life consequences, e.g., poor teacher performance, low college grade point average, and being sent to prison (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1975). To characterize this phase:

- (1) event scores were sums over aggregates of different events;
- (2) prospective studies were not done; and
- (3) the role of resources was not considered.

In 1976, John Cassel, an epidemiologist, published a review (Cassel, 1976) in which he identified protective functions provided by resources in the face of stress. He proposed social support as a plausible protective resource and coined the term the buffer effect to reflect that social support would reduce the adverse effects of stress on the health of the person exposed to rather extreme stress. In that same year, Bruce and Barbara Dohrenwend (1975) edited a book on stressful life events which included a chapter by Bruce Dohrenwend (1975) emphasizing the potential confound between the event and the symptom: the symptom could be causing the event as easily as the event causing the symptom. He emphasized the need for longitudinal designs to study the causal effects of events.

The next decade, from 1975 to 1985, might be considered the era of social support. This included two lines of work: the first led to greater specification through the identification of the various ingredients of social support. The second line of work was directed at greater explication of its possible functions, still primarily in relation to stressful events. The evidence for the buffer effect was equivocal, which prompted debates and hypotheses regarding the conditions under which the buffer effect would be found. In the latter part of this period, added interest in specification was directed at studying the effects of particular types of events rather than events in the aggregate.

This new emphasis on specific events rather than aggregate events came from both a sociological perspective and a psychological perspective. The sociological emphasis has been on social roles. For example, this was notable in

the work of Kessler and his colleagues (Kessler and McLeod, 1984) and Thoits (1987) who used the term "acute stress" to suggest that different types of events (e.g., events occurring in the family) had different effects on respondents of different gender. The psychological perspective emphasizes the influence of personality or person variables in construing or appraising different events (e.g., Hammen, Marks, de Mayo, & Mayol, 1985).

In 1985 two articles appeared that represent these trends in current thinking. In the first article, reflecting the trend toward specification, Cohen and Wills (1985) reviewed the equivocal research on the buffer effect of social support and proposed that the structural feature of social support (or strength of social network) had direct effects on health and mental health but not a buffering effect, while a functional feature (e.g., perceived support) had a buffer effect and not a direct effect on well being. (This hypothesis is often cited without noting that the Cohen and Wills review did not provide clear-cut evidence for the hypothesis.) Cohen and Wills also proposed that the salience of the social support feature for the specific event, or the relevance of the resource to the demands of the event, would determine its buffering effectiveness. However, there was too little research relevant to that hypothesis for them to draw a conclusion as to its plausibility. More recently, Cutrona and Russell (in press) proposed a model for optimum matching of forms of social support to types of events. They reviewed the literature and proposed desirability, controllability, and life domain as event dimensions that require particular types of socially supportive behaviors, including expression of caring, tangible support, and informational support.

In the other article, reflecting the trend toward explication, Wheaton (1985) explicated a variety of possible functions that resources could play vis-a-vis stress. These included the direct effect of the resource on the symptoms, that Wheaton

called a deterrent effect, and the interactive buffer effect. Wheaton also defined a function in which the resource reduced the effect of the stress, termed the "stress deterrent," (which has also been termed the "stress prevention" function), and another function in which the stress had a strengthening effect on the resource, which he termed the "additive buffer" (which has also been termed the "support mobilization" function). Wheaton also identified the "intervening" function in which stress had effects on resources that did not have beneficial effects, one form of which would be the "support deterioration" function suggested by Barrera (1988) and Lin and Ensel (1984).

Another new trend is to give greater recognition to the context in which stress and resources operate. One example has been to examine the contribution of predisposing factors to the effects of both resources and events to well being. At a recent conference, Linda George (1989) emphasized the need to study age as a substantive variable beyond its role as a control variable, suggesting the need to study age by event and age by resource interactions.

TRENDS

Thus, these are some of the broad trends that I see. Now I would like to add some sub-ideas within these trends and give some examples from our project.

display Chart 1 here

For specification, in addition to studying specific features of resources, e.g., perceived support, and particular sub-types of events, e.g., bereavement, and the optimal event-resource match, there is the need to identify the repertoire of the

potential coping "career". One aspect of this is the versatility of the resource across event types. This shades into explication.

For explication, current work is establishing the different functions of different resources. There is also the need to develop models of the mechanisms underlying these functions. I will also discuss the characteristic of resource "susceptibility" or the degree to which resources are changed by events.

For context, there is recognition of the importance of the past history of the person that influences effects of resources and events. There is also the need to recognize the shorter term process where not only do resources affect events, but events affect resources and events affect subsequent events.

The Louisville Project

Since the examples will come from a number of studies from the same project, a brief overview of that project may be helpful.

present Chart 2 about here

A prospective design was used, respondents were interviewed every six months for up to five interviews. This allowed controls for the effects of predisposing factors and prior levels of symptoms, and made interpretation of causal direction possible. Certain resource functions require at least three waves of data.

The sample was a probability sample and it was large, with nearly 3000 respondents aged 55 and older on the first wave. This allowed a representative and naturalistic sampling of life event experiences of older adults, and respondents were not selected because of the event happening to them.

The interview included a comprehensive battery of scales: five mental health scales, five resource scales, five event probes, and extensive demographic measures.

CHART 1
TRENDS AND NEW DIRECTIONS
IN RESOURCE-LIFE EVENT RESEARCH

I. SPECIFICATION

- A. EXAMINE SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE RESOURCE, E.G.,
PERCEIVED SUPPORT
- B. EXAMINE PARTICULAR SUB-TYPES OF LIFE EVENTS, E.G.,
BEREAVEMENT
- C. EXAMINE OPTIMUM RESOURCE-EVENT MATCHES
- ~~D.~~ ESTABLISH THE POTENTIAL COPING "CAREER" OF A
RESOURCE ACROSS EVENT SUB-TYPES, E.G., ITS
VERSATILITY

II. EXPLICATION

- A. ESTABLISH DIFFERENT MODELS OR FUNCTIONS OF
RESOURCES, E.G., SUPPORT DETERIORATION
- B. DEVELOP MODELS FOR MECHANISMS UNDERLYING
FUNCTIONS, E.G., APPRAISAL
- ~~C.~~ STUDY THE CHARACTERISTIC OF RESOURCE
SUSCEPTABILITY

III. CONTEXT

- A. PREDISPOSING FACTORS, E.G., AGE, SEX, CLASS
- ~~B.~~ DYNAMIC CYCLES OVER TIME: RESOURCE-EVENT-RESOURCE-
EVENT-EVENT

(~~newer directions~~)

CHART 2
OVERVIEW OF LOUISVILLE PROJECT

SAMPLE: PROBABILITY SAMPLE OF PERSONS AGED 55 AND OLDER IN
KENTUCKY: 3000 ON THE FIRST WAVE

DESIGN: PROSPECTIVE: RESPONDENTS INTERVIEWED EVERY SIX MONTHS FOR
UP TO FIVE INTERVIEWS

MEASURES:

MENTAL HEALTH: CES-D DEPRESSION

GENERAL WELL BEING

SPEILBERGER TRAIT ANXIETY

BRADBURN AFFECT BALANCE

LSI-Z LIFE SATISFACTION

RESOURCES: HEALTH STATUS

SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS

PERCEIVED SUPPORT

SELF ESTEEM

HEALTH LOCUS OF CONTROL

LIFE EVENTS: DESIRABILITY

DEGREE OF CHANGE

PREOCCUPATION

NOVELTY

TIME OF EVENT

SPECIFICITY

Event Sub-Types

Different events would seem to have different coping requirements and resources could be expected to vary in their coping effectiveness for different event sub-types.

Different sub-types of bereavement and their effects. We have done a series of studies on the effects of bereavement on health and depression:

(1) In one study we found virtually no effects on physical health of bereavement in general, i.e., from deaths of all family members and of friends (Murrell, Himmelfarb, & Phifer, 1988).

(2) In a subsequent study (Murrell & Himmelfarb, 1989), we found effects on depressive symptoms of attachment bereavement, i.e., death of spouse, parent, or child, but not of other family members or friends, and the effects were transitory, with recovery typical within one year.

(3) In still another study (Norris & Murrell, in press), we found more lasting depression for one third of those who had lost a spouse, and minimal depressive reactions from losses of a parent or child, but again no effects on health.

(4) Thus, the strongest effects of bereavement were for death of spouse, and were limited to depressive symptoms.

Challenge events and social embeddedness: Resource accessibility. We have just completed analysis of a study (Murrell, Norris, & Chipley, 1990) that, in contrast to these other studies, used positive affect as the outcome variable of interest, and examined desirable "challenge" events rather than undesirable events. Challenge events were those that our sample as a whole had evaluated as desirable, involved some degree of change, and could entail a degree of risk or challenge. Among these

were such events as a new hobby, a move, a change in jobs, retirement, and going to church more often. The purpose here was to compare the relative contributions of social embeddedness and perceived support on the functions defined by Wheaton. The terminology had to be changed, translating terms for stress and symptoms into those for growth and happiness! The deterrent functions become "promotion" functions, the buffer functions become "booster" functions.

present Figure 2 here

As can be seen in Figure 2:

- (1) Perceived support had a direct positive effect on positive affect two years later, but social embeddedness did not. However:
- (2) Social embeddedness increased the likelihood of subsequent challenge events, or their perception, but perceived support did not.

present Figure 3 here

As can be seen in Figure 3:

- (3) The stronger the challenge events, the greater the increase in social embeddedness. Challenge events did not change perceived support.
- (4) Neither feature of social support interacted with challenge events.

Over the past ten years or so we have done hundreds of analyses of the effects of events on mental health, examining all sorts of events and measures of events, and our various measures of mental health. My impression is that the

findings for challenge events on positive affect is the strongest prospective effect of events on mental health we have seen in this project's data.

Perhaps we have been concentrating on the weaker end of the dimension. Perhaps life events have stronger effects on positive mental health than on negative mental health. Perhaps we need greater attention to both desirable events and positive mental health.

Optimum Match: Health and Self Esteem

In another study (Murrell, Meeks, & Walker, 1990), we compared the resources of health status and self esteem on the five functions of Wheaton with respect to the two event types of medical events and bereavement (all types). The assumption was that health would be the more relevant resource for medical events, but than it would have no advantage for bereavements. We found:

- (1) Both resources had strong direct effects on depression, independent of the events, supporting Wheaton's distress deterrent model.
- (2) Neither resource interacted with either type of event, thus offering no support for the interactive buffer model.
- (3) Good health, but not esteem, made medical events less likely, but medical events did not lead to increased depression.
- (4) Both medical events and bereavements weakened subsequent health, thus supporting a resource deterioration model, but not event relevance.
- (5) Generally, there was little evidence that event-relevance made a difference. This is similar to the findings of Tetzloff and Barørra (1987) who used very different samples and measures. Perhaps the salient matching dimension between resources and events is not their face content.

Versatility

Versatility refers to the number of different ways a resource can facilitate adjustment.

Widowhood. In analyses of our widowed respondents we have found:

(1) Pre-widowhood social embeddedness reduced post-widowhood depression.

(2) Strong pre-widowhood embeddedness made it more likely that respondents would cope with widowhood by increasing their activities.

(3) Strong concurrent embeddedness reduced global stress following widowhood, which in turn reduced post-widowhood depression.

Challenge events. In our analyses of challenge events and positive affect, we have found:

(4) The stronger the embeddedness, the stronger the challenge events, whether measured by their frequency of occurrence or the appraisal of their desirability.

Medical events, health, and esteem. In our comparison of health and esteem we found:

(5) Esteem had only direct effects on depression, it did not influence and was not influenced by events, as was health.

Summary. Across these last two studies we have found support for all but one of the five resource functions posed by Wheaton: the exception was the interactive buffer function. This included direct effects and indirect effects. In our studies, social embeddedness has been beneficial in a number of ways across different types of events. This would suggest that research comparing multiple resource functions in various event-resource combinations, with the eventual cumulation of knowledge that would come from such studies, will be important for

the field and for interventions.

EXPLICATION

Susceptibility

There are two resource functions that assume that resources are changed by events. These are the resource mobilization function, in which the event causes an increase in the strength or amount of the resource; and the resource deterioration function, in which the event weakens the resource. To study these functions requires at least three waves of data: the pre-event wave to establish the pre-event status of the resource, the event wave, and then the post-event wave to establish the degree of resource change.

In our study of medical events, we found health to be vulnerable to illness and to bereavements, being weakened by these events.

In our study of challenge events, social embeddedness was responsive to challenge events, it was accessible to these events, in this case being strengthened.

Thus a characteristic of resources that bears further examination in the future is their susceptibility to influence by different types of events. This would be a clear reversal in focus for the field; i.e., not only can event effects be influenced by resources, as conceived in the buffer effect, but resources can also be affected by events. Its susceptibility would then become a part of the definition of a resource's career potential for coping. For example, from our studies of older adults we would describe social embeddedness as both versatile and susceptible; self esteem would be described as neither versatile nor susceptible.

Mechanisms

Barrera (1988), among others, has advocated developing models for the mechanisms underlying the operation of resources. One example is a study by

Hammen, Marks, de Mayo, and Mayol (1985) who compared dependent versus self-critical college students in their responses to events involving interpersonal conflict or events involving achievement. The underlying mechanism was posited to be the personality "schemas" that influenced the appraisal of events.

CONTEXT

Predisposing Factors

In one of our studies (Murrell & Norris, in press), social class affected both resources and events: the lower the social class the weaker the social embeddedness and the greater the undesirable events.

In the study of challenge events, we divided the sample at the mean on age, social class, and urban/rural residence. The strong effects of embeddedness on subsequent challenge events and of challenge events on embeddedness remained for those who were older, lived in a rural area, or were of lower social class but not for the more advantaged groups.

This suggests that predisposing factors need to be explicitly studied as substantive variables, with inclusion of interactions of events and resources with predisposing factors or within subgroupings of a factor.

This specification by predisposing factor also adds to the description of the resource's career potential. For example, we might then say that social embeddedness is more versatile and susceptible among less advantaged older adults.

Dynamic Cycles

The longitudinal design used in these studies revealed the cycle of relationships between resources and events over time. This is depicted in Figure

4.

present Figure 4 here

(1) Resources (specifying the resource feature) would influence the occurrence or impact of subsequent events (specific event types), e.g., embeddedness made challenge events more likely;

(2) Events would then change the resource, e.g., medical events weakened health status;

(3) Also, events would stimulate other subsequent events.

To capture this more naturalistic temporal process of this phenomena, prospective designs are required.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude:

If you were to review this research area ten years from now, August 2000, what would you hope would have been done? For the field to have developed to a significant degree, I would offer that three directions of research would be essential.

(1) PRECISE STUDIES: we need studies that are specific, rigorous and refined, whose resource measures are clearly unidimensional, and whose event sub-types are narrowly defined.

(2) COMPARATIVE STUDIES: we also need studies that compare different resources on different event sub-types, studies that are more complex and cumbersome.

Both of these studies would add knowledge on resource career potentials, e.g., versatility and susceptibility.

Both of these types of studies should also examine desirable events and positive mental health.

(3) **MECHANISMS:** models of mechanisms that operate across different events, or within event classes, need to be developed and tested, drawing on both types of the studies listed above.

REFERENCES

- Barrera, M. Jr. (1988). Models of social support and life stress: Beyond the buffering hypothesis. In L. H. Cohen (Ed.), Life events and psychological functioning. (pp. 211-236). New York: Sage.
- Cassel, J. (1976). The contribution of the social environment to host resistance. American Journal of Epidemiology, 104, 107-123.
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. Psychological Bulletin, 98, 310-357.
- Cutrona, D., Russell D. (in press). Type of social support and specific stress: Toward a theory of optimal matching. In I. Sarason, B. Sarason, & G. Pierce (Eds.), Social support: An interactional view. New York: Wiley.
- Dohrenwend, Barbara, & Dohrenwend, Bruce (1975). A brief historical introduction to research on stressful life events. In Barbara Dohrenwend & Bruce Dohrenwend (Eds.), Stressful life events: Their nature and effects. (pp.1-5). New York: Wiley.
- Dohrenwend, Bruce (1975). Problems in defining and sampling the relevant population of stressful life events. In Barbara Dohrenwend & Bruce Dohrenwend, Stressful life events: Their nature and effects. (pp.275-310). New York: Wiley.

- George, L. (1989). Social factors and the onset and outcome of depression. Paper presented at Pennsylvania State University, Gerontology Center Conference on Aging, Health Behaviors, and Health Outcomes. State College, PA.
- Hammen, C., Marks, Tl, deMayo, R., & Mayol, A. (1985). Self-schemas and risk for depression: A prospective study. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49, 1147-1159.
- Kessler, R., & McLeod, J. (1984). Sex differences in vulnerability to undesirable life events. American Sociological Review, 49, 620-631.
- Lin, N., & Ensel, W. (1984). Depression-mobility and its social etiology: the role of life events and social support. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 25, 176-188.
- Murrell, S., & Norris, F. (in press). Differential social support and life change as contributors to the social class-distress relationship in older adults. Psychology and Aging.
- Murrell, S., Meeks, S., & Walker, J. (1990). Protective contributions of health and self esteem to depressive symptoms in older adults: multiple functions and event-relevance. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Murrell, S., Norris, F., & Chipley, Q. (1990). [Challenge events, social embeddedness, perceived support, and positive affect among older adults: Booster effects]. Unpublished raw data.
- Murrell, S., & Himmelfarb, S. (1989). Effects of attachment bereavement and pre-event conditions on subsequent depressive symptoms in older adults. Psychology and Aging, 4, 166-172.

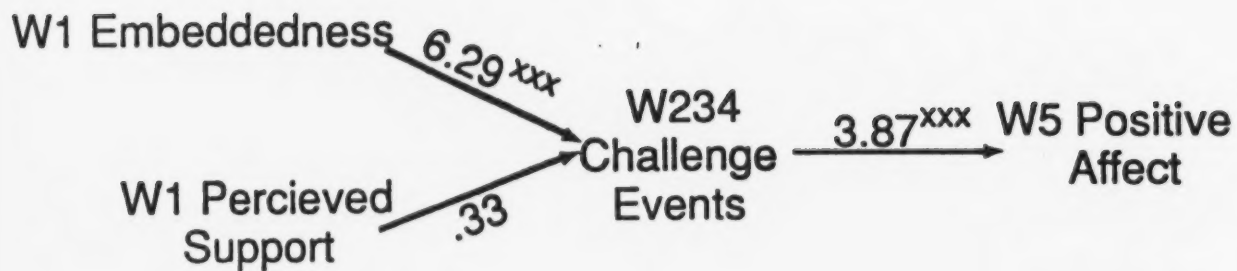
- Murrell, S., Himmelfarb, S., & Phifer, J. (1988). Effects of bereavement/loss and pre-event status on subsequent physical health in older adults. International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 27, 89-107.
- Norris, F., & Murrell, S. (in press). Social support, life events, and stress as modifiers of adjustment to bereavement by older adults. Psychology and Aging.
- Tetzloff, C., & Barrera, M. Jr. (1987). Divorcing mothers and social support: Testing the specificity of buffering effects. American Journal of Community Psychology, 15, 419-434.
- Thoits, P. (1987). Gender and marital status in control and distress: common stress versus unique stress explanations. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 28, 7-22.
- Wheaton, B. (1985). Models for the stress-buffering functions of coping resources. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 26, 352-364.

Life events → Well Being

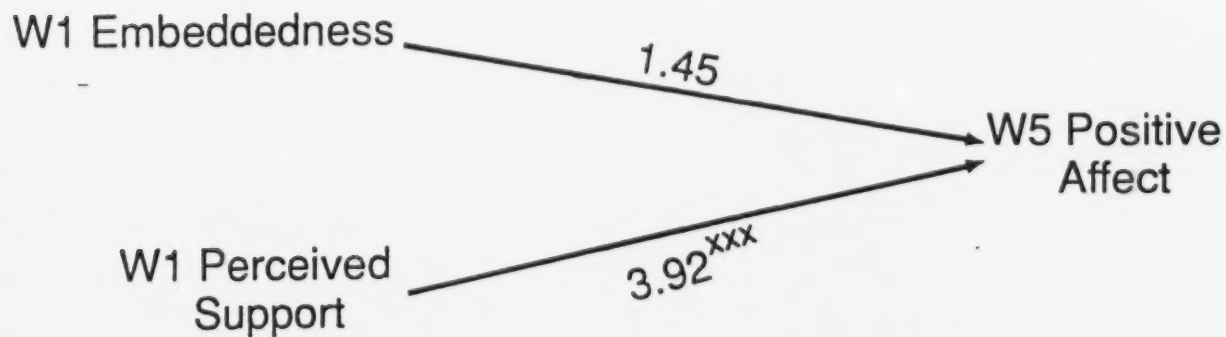
Pre-1975

Social Support
↓
Life Events → Well Being

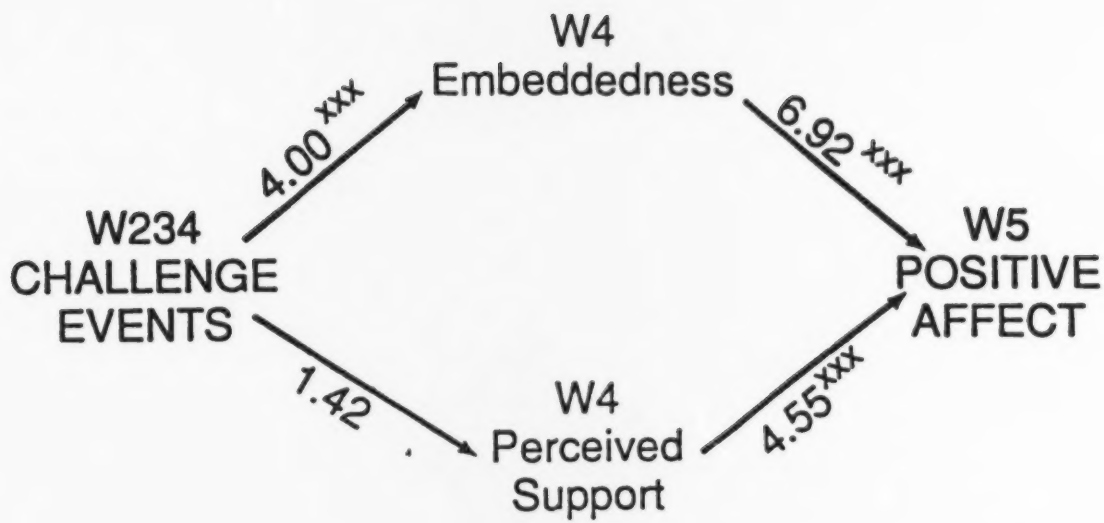
1975 - 1985



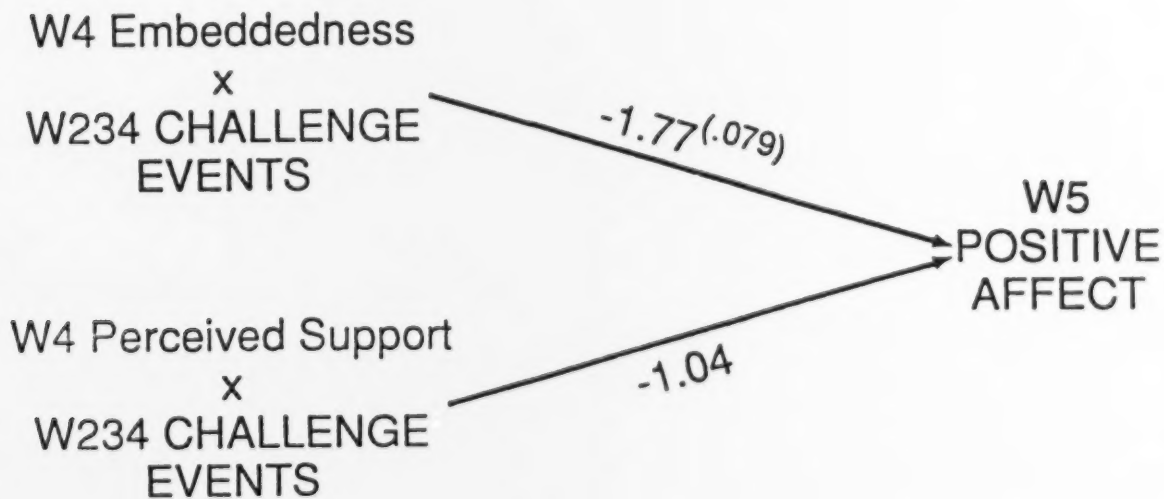
Indirect Promotion Function



Direct Promotion Function



Additive Booster Function



Interactive Booster Function

